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**Demystifying Celtic Identity**

James Macpherson, Samuel Ferguson and the Stabilisation of Constructed Nationalist  
Sentiment prior to the Celtic Revival

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## A) Marketing of Celticism in Ireland

The cultural legacy of a country's Iron Age past can be perceived nowhere as clearly as in today's Ireland. Celticism has turned into an exclusive brand and the tourism industry is very determined to sell merchandise in the style of Celtic La Tène art. The Irish Tourist Board's agenda is to make the nation's history easily accessible in both ways, geographically and cognitively. Centuries of great achievements, great hardships and great complexity are squeezed into a highly uniform historical storyline which reaches back into the very core epoch of the island's tribal past. What is achieved in consequence is a commodified history broken down to the most basic dichotomy: the Celtic-Christian culture.<sup>1</sup> Yet, blind adherence to demands of a globalised industry inevitably leads to the devaluation of a nation's unique cultural heritage. Drastically speaking, the Irish Republic is currently at risk to adopt a superimposed way of exhibiting its past in compliance with the expectations set by the paramount powers of globalisation. Colonisers have become "globalisers," so to speak. In Ireland we see many aspects of cultural and political everyday life integrally defined by an assumed ancestry dating back to a time when the Latin alphabet had not yet been introduced to the peoples of the North. Nonetheless, there exists a very particular conception of unique traits inherited by the Irish, which are ascribed to them equally emphatically by visitors and the native population alike. Archaeological findings have helped a lot to determine the degree of ancient exceptionality to be found on the Archipelago and together with popular myth have contributed to this great national narrative for a long time. It could be argued that when the Celtic Literary Revival commenced, it already found a great deal of the preparatory work done thanks to centuries of scholarship on the insular pre-Roman past. A very decisive period for the awareness of Britain's "Celtic"<sup>2</sup> ancestry lies undoubtedly in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the time of Romantic literature in Europe.

The main focus of this paper will lie on the ever increasing notion of this singular identity on the British Isles and the reasons for its popularity especially in the eighteenth century. Considerations of literary genre and important theory on historiography will help to prove that the narration of past is always ideologically loaded, and therefore the question about a country's authentic past will be asked anew. In James Macpherson the driving

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Irish Tourist board and the marketing of Celticism see: O'Driscoll p. xi; cf. Foster p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ch. III for a description on the terminology forthwith adopted in this paper.

force behind the renewed conception of the pre-Christian insular culture will be introduced and related to earlier narratives. The 18<sup>th</sup> century and the aftermath of *The Works of Ossian* will be regarded as the turning point in the national self-perception of Scotland. Traces of Ossian in Ireland, the British Isles as a whole, and eventually, Europe will present the full impact of Macpherson's legacy on ideological thinking of its time. Samuel Ferguson, who was writing in the tradition of the Scottish predecessor, will be depicted as one realisation of the renewed reputedly Celtic tradition. A contrastive analysis of both authors will then end in the attempt to illuminate the relation between authorial intention and the actual potential a work can unfold in its public reception.

## B) Demystifying Celtic Identity

### 1. Situating Macpherson and His Works

How do we perceive a nation? How do we perceive our nation? A first approach towards questions of this sort might be to open a history book or hack the requested search term into the keyboard. What we will find then might satisfy our need to connect this respective regional entity to our general network of conceptions. A European nation will therefore be enrooted into the common European context, be it in a historical or ideological sense. The major aim of any such historical survey will be to insert this singular idea, country X, into the big picture, namely the West, Europe or any other semantic construct to which we can refer. Exactly this entrenchment into western world as it was perceived in the eighteenth century was at stake in the nations now known as the Celtic Fringe. Ireland and Scotland were on the brink of losing their domestic language, culture, social structure and therefore nearly forfeited an independent identity which separated them from their all too dominant partner England. What had been distinctive expressions of culture were suddenly thought primitive, what had accounted for national pride and self-esteem was prohibited for fear of its militarist potential, and what had been orally handed down from one generation to the next in the Gaelic language was not seen as equivalent to the written word and therefore suffered from "poor reputation" (Henshaw 198). This desolate scene was turned into a treasure trove when James Macpherson edited his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands* in 1760. His claim to possess an authentic written source of Gaelic poetry dating back to the third century stirred the excitement in a

reputedly ancient “Celtic” civilization undermining the great figures of ancient Rome by exquisite refinement and noble chivalry. In *Fingal* and *Temora* new ancient characters to identify with followed in 1761 and 1763 and made an idealised ancestor graspable for a broad audience. 1765 then was the year when Macpherson’s major opus appeared as a collected edition named *The Works of Ossian*, which immediately caught on in several European countries and was translated into five languages within the year of its publication. What made it such an influential reading was its scientific appeal, embedding the original narrations into a framework of reputedly scientific dissertations by Dr. Hugh Blair and Macpherson himself. The author managed with great wit to argue for his own persona being merely a translator of genuine Gaelic text. Narrations which in other cases might never have convinced scholars all over Europe were shrewdly supported by purported historical facts and an extensive field research conducted in the Scottish Highlands. The result of Macpherson’s pageant was that it broke loose a pan-European fondness of Scotland and its exceptional cultural heritage, which induced enthusiasts of multiple fields to delve into this new scientific tradition of Celtic studies. Scotland had therefore restored its self-esteem as a culturally distinguished nation, and even when the faulty nature of Macpherson’s translations came to the surface, that did not break Europe’s interest in a mystic domestic past. Despite its heyday lying in Romanticism and the nineteenth-century, Scotland’s Iron Age legacy is still a major self-promoting factor for the entire nation.

## 2. What does *Celtic* Mean? A Historical Survey

This poses the question whether a Celtic community has ever existed and in how far information on a pre-Christian population of Scotland, or the British Isles as a whole, is still retrievable. Like so many things in European history, the historical record of Celtic tribes starts with Caesar. In his report on the wars in Gaul he asserts that the region is divided into several parts, which are inhabited by the *Belgae*, the *Aquitani* and the *Celtae* (Caesar I 1). The *Germani* on the other hand supposedly lived on the right bank of the Rhine and were excluded from the Gallic regions on the left bank. This very arbitrary division of the Roman province *Gallia* is still irritating scholars interested in Britain’s past and its relation to Iron Age Europe. According to the great emperor, the Celts were only one out of several tribes in Gaul and did not stand in connection with the British chieftains

as the *Belgae* or *Morini* did (Caesar IV 21). Nonetheless, one has to bear in mind that his accounts only date back to the first century AD and therefore reveal hardly any information on the initial settling of Scotland and Ireland. In the eyes of Caesar and his contemporaries, Britannia was primarily inhabited by the *Britanni*, the ancient Britons. In the first century BC, however, it was common practice that the different tribes of Gaul and Britannia were united by trade and language but differed in their set of beliefs, laws and dialects (Caesar I 1, III 8-9). Several Roman and Greek authors such as Strabon or Tacitus describe the *Britanni* as an independent commonwealth of tribes which were connected to Gaul by trade and some sort of intermarriage (cf. Tacitus XI). Their independence also shows in regionally differing relations to the Mediterranean empire. Throughout the history of Rome's attempts to invade Britain, we see several tribes defeated, some pledging allegiance and some fleeing to the rebelling clans, primarily of the North. This uncontrollable condition eventually made it necessary for the empire to erect the Hadrian's Wall. Boudicca then was arguably the only ancient leader on the British Isles to unite several tribes under a shared cause (cf. Tacitus XVI). In consequence, the earliest text sources on Britain's inhabitants present a country which is distributed into several distinct communities referring to themselves as neither Britons nor Celts (cf. Kuckenburg 161).

When authors speak of the "Celtic" civilisation today, of course they mean the inhabitants of central and Eastern Europe in the last Millennium BC. Especially the central European Hallstadt and La Tène culture is associated with Celtic culture and ingenuity today (cf. O'Driscoll xiv). They are seen as the centres of specific tribes, some of which spread over large parts of today's Europe and even crossed the Alps in the attempt to extend their habitat. In their scientific contributions, a select few still give their terminology special thought and adhere to the general rule that *Celtic* means speaking one variety of the Indo-Germanic Celtic branch.<sup>3</sup> With respect to art and artefacts, the Celtic label is more directly linked to the Hallstatt and La Tène area. Situated in the very core of today's German-speaking areas, the respective tribes there brought craftsmanship and handicraft to such perfection that it enabled them to market their goods far across domestic borders. "By the third century BC it extended from Jutland to North Africa and from Asia Minor to Ireland" (Moss 39). Additionally, there is strong evidence that a large group of people, probably several tribes together, became migratory during the fifth century BC and resettled on the margins of central European areas so far inhabited. In the eyes of modern science, this brings Britain to the scene for the first time. While in the South Rome had to

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<sup>3</sup> See Birkhan p. 16: "Kelte ist wer keltisch spricht."

struggle under a big Gallic army led over the Alps by Brennus, the North –and Britain respectively– were introduced to new cultural peculiarities and artefacts (cf. *ibid.* 39f.). It is this spread of artefacts associated with the Hallstatt and La Tène culture provoking scientific blunders until today. Culture in an archaeological sense is not to be mistaken with a distinct people or area but merely defines related patterns in art and performances very similar to an artistic style. Since excavations in Britain traced this particular style back into the fourth pre-Christian century, some sort of contact between groups from mainland Europe and the British Isles must have existed then. Nonetheless, at no point in history did a wave of “Celts” flush Britain and began to become permanently resident there.

Another attempt to explain the population patterns of the British Isles has been made by philologists as early as 1582. In his *Historia*, George Buchanan refuted the assumption that an ancient queen Scota had first set foot on Ireland with only one shipload of people and in the course of reproduction accounted for the entire population of Ireland and northern Britain, that is Scotland. He reasoned from comparative studies on the European languages that the Gaelic dialects of Ireland and the Scottish Highlands had to be related to the old languages of central Europe in one way or another. Therefore he named one branch of this old European variety *Celtic* to describe the similarities between the Scottish and Irish native language (cf. Collis 37f.). And once again, this label sometimes was considered an ethnic rather than a linguistic marker. A similar misconception was caused by the differentiation of the Celtic language into a Q- and a P-branch. As soon as scholars tried to date these linguistic phenomena and analyse their development in different regions of the British Isles, the discussion about Iron Age immigration waves resurfaced once again (cf. *ibid.* 207). It is extremely easy to oversimplify the population history of the British Isles, especially since written evidence from pre-Roman times is practically inexistent. Merely because La Tène artefacts in Britain coincide with migratory behaviour of certain European tribes, we must not deduce from this the very beginnings of human population on the archipelago. Rather a steady exchange between some sort of native population and continental newcomers is to be assumed, which eventually led to an intermingling of culture and genetic material. The same applies to Bede’s medieval postulations that northern, Scythian tribes primarily settled in today’s Scotland whereas people inhabiting Brittany and the Iberian coast began to spread their colonies in southern Britain and the Hibernian southeast (cf. *ibid.* 29). In analogy to the Christian faith a couple of centuries later, continental culture slowly began to establish on the British Isles from the

fifth pre-Christian century onward. It was marked by diverse ways of life combined with a varying dialect, which resulted from widely dispersed origins on the continent. British culture itself did not restrict itself to the imported mores but developed distinct insular habits clearly setting it apart from the practices of its neighbours.<sup>4</sup> Early history of the British Isles shows how all sides benefited from adopting foreign influences into an already existent system rather than risking a cultural clash. For a proper understanding of this paper, the reader must bear the following aspects in mind. The term culture can never represent all aspects of life pertaining to the countless tribes of central Europe in the first millennium BC. Therefore a universal Celtic culture cannot exist and should generally not exceed the realm of La Tène-style or Hallstatt-style artefacts. The only recorded tribal unions from ancient Gaul date back to Roman times and Caesar, Tacitus, Livy and Strabo are the first authors to use the term *Celtic* as a label to define some sort of foreign community. There is however not a single evidence, and it is highly unlikely, that the term *Celtae* or *Celtoi* has ever been in use as national marker by the respective tribes and at no time did the inhabitants of Britain stand against the Roman invader as a nation of Celts (cf. Collis 223).

The Irish religious congregation in particular has always been highly acceptant of local, reputedly pagan, rituals for their authoritative status deriving from age (cf. Carroll 7, 61; Máiréad 76). Apart from some ogham-stone inscriptions, the inhabitants of the island left no recordings. Archaeological findings and research into text sources even lead to the assumption that before the 7<sup>th</sup> century hardly any notion of national identity could have existed within the separate kingdoms of Ireland (cf. Ó Corráin 1, 6). Naturally, the first written accounts of the Irish being a nation –not necessarily a “Celtic” one– must stem from Christian sources and then only a fraction of these were handed down into later centuries (Moss 12). The fact that traces of a pagan past actually survived is owed to the peculiar way Christian mission dealt with it. Instead of destroying every single remnant of pre-Christian culture, monasteries were working hard to explore characteristics of it and rework it into a Christian context (cf. Moss 10). Whether this happened due to a certain degree of fascination with the discovered material, or simply proved as the most effective way to attract new followers, remains open for debate. Despite all the advantages the diligent recording by the monks brought along, one thing has to be kept in mind. By adapting local myths and rites to the Christian doctrine, the scholars had to be very creative in adapting the material, and without doubt their treatment of oral sources was very

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kuckenburg p.166 on diverging funeral rites; Moore p.42f. on an distinctly insular art style.



eclectic. As a result, Ireland was endowed with what was to be the first version of a foundational myth and ideologically tainted history (cf. Reynolds 384, cf. Ó Corráin 3). The tempting belief that most sites emitting a mystic aura or revealing a ritualistic background were leftovers from a Celtic cultures attracted scientists. Commencing already in the Renaissance, many set out to explore these monuments steeped in tradition to establish an antipode to Graeco-Roman exclusivity. Triggered by pitfalls of that sort, churches, trees, wells etc. all of a sudden became symbols for Ireland's pagan history, a trend subsumed today under the term "pagan origins hypothesis" (Carroll 7). Despite this rich history of enquiries into Scotland's and Ireland's pre-Christian past, the term *Celtic* itself resurfaced notably with George Buchanan's *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* and merely served as linguistic terminology for a couple of centuries. It was not until the eighteenth century, however, that Ireland and Scotland misused the name as the name of an entire people and explicitly prided themselves on being "Celtic" nations. All the ideological implications of this self-referencing will be laid out in the subsequent chapters. To facilitate terminology and mark the abuse of the term *Celtic* in an ethnic sense, it will only be highlighted by quotation marks throughout this paper when it seems aligned to notions of race and genetic material.

### 3. The National Inferiority Complex of the Celtic Fringe

#### 3.1 Political Dimensions

For a first grasp on James Macpherson's incentives, we need to analyse the situation in Scotland as it was in the years around his 1760 edition of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. Without doubt, the country was feeling the consequences of a century marked by unrest. Several setbacks had left the nation politically as well as culturally in a crisis with no relief in prospect. Not only had the English armies succeeded in thwarting the final Jacobite uprising in 1745, but the repressive measures that followed this defeat helped to reinforce the crown's unconditional power. Sanctions against the traitors of primarily the northern parts of Scotland were given the highest priority. It culminated in clearances of entire districts in the rural areas making way for the gentry's renewed interest in sheep farming, which only recently had been subsidised by the South (cf. Richards 52). While these measures affected the Highland areas only, in other parts landowners now saw themselves

forced to abandon their land partly in reaction to relentless lease policies implemented by the parliament.<sup>5</sup> As if that had not been enough, England had commissioned extensive disarming of the clans, which left the key element of Scottish social structure defenceless and exposed to foreign influence. Dependence on England's good will all of a sudden had become the status quo (cf. Porter 405). In the wake of such interventions into the country's core, a steady dissolving of traditional clan structures and the Anglicisation of Gàidhealtachd progressed with rapid pace. For entire communities, emigration arguably turned out to be the only option. On the other side there stood England seemingly at the height of its vigour and with an exceptional position on the archipelago. Economically, it was spearheading the industrial Revolution and was about to change the world's conception of labour. Culturally, it had long since profited from its global trade and its renowned educational sector. With no devastated domestic culture of its own, England was still able to position itself within the insular history reaching back into the dark ages. For centuries writers had kept a quasi-factual historiography running and furnished literary tradition with indigenous mythological narratives of less scientific pretence (cf. Ferguson 121). This way, the myth of Brutus was still lingering in people's collective memory and traced England's roots back to ancient Troy (cf. Collis 35). Being Aeneas's grandson, so the story goes, the hero saw himself predestined to rid the British island of its giants. This way, English ancestry in no respect fell behind the celebrated heroes of the ancient world. At a later stage, King Arthur had been the most celebrated mythological figure throughout the middle ages, although it cannot be counted as foundational myth. Further adaptations such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* give witness to a flourishing literary tradition around this celebrated king and his entourage on the British Isles (cf. Ferguson 121). English Renaissance writings as represented by the works of Edmund Spenser and John Milton were still an integral part of higher education and guaranteed cultural authority in yet another literary epoch. It was the awareness of a well recorded past alongside with several fictional reworkings of well-established themes that made England's academia continuously produce under very advantageous circumstances.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the same cannot be said of its neighbouring countries. For Scotland in comparison, all there was left to do was to adopt material and make the English benchmark authors a part of its domestic education while almost nothing from the native oral tradition was graspable. Translations from the original Gaelic tongue were very scarce

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed information on these repressive policies consult: Aitchison, Peter, and Andrew Cassell. *The Lowland Clearances: Scotland's Silent Revolution, 1760-1830*. Birlinn, 2012. Ch. VI / VII.

and not all too many scholars had previously deemed Highland culture worthy of their attention. This lack of esteem is mirrored in the way Gaelic literature had been dealt with in the decades preceding Macpherson's publications. Only very briefly before Macpherson had John Smith taken up the research into original Gaelic and Nordic sources. First translations of authentic poetry however appeared as late as 1780 (cf. Henshaw 198f). What the few remnants of Gaelic poetry from the eighteenth century mainly have in common is their clerical background and had it not been for service records, hardly any texts would have survived into modern times. Scottish academia appears not to have taken any interest in productions from the Gàidhealtachd areas and the reason for that lay only partially in the lack of infrastructure there (cf. *ibid.*). David Malcom, who had become interested in the language of the Highlands itself, had gained high reputation as a scientist at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but his productions never included any original text versions (cf. Ferguson 210). On top of this bleak cultural situation, Scotland was still carrying out something like a literary feud with its neighbouring state, thereby affecting cultural exchange. As Scots often struggled with the mark of primitivism and barbarianism, texts commemorating the victory over the English army at Bannockburn were their subtle means of revenge (cf. Dennis 12). Already before the Jacobite Rebellion works such as Hamilton's *The Wallace* had stirred up the crowds against the haughty union partner. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Wallace figure in Porter's *The Scottish Chiefs* would still find many admirers. Not even universities did refrain from deprecatory views of the respective other (cf. Ferguson 227f, 232). The English opposing camp, however, had two very accredited representatives in Samuel Johnson and Charles Churchill. When Johnson was one of the leading scholars to dismantle Macpherson's questionably methods, this once again meant a major victory for England's cultural superiority. At the same time, he appeared to have destroyed the Scottish neighbour's desperate attempt to add yet a second narrative to its collective memory.<sup>6</sup> Yet, that impression did not last long.

It is hard to imagine any attempts of approximation between the two countries in this quarrelsome environment. Nevertheless, some Scottish writers had apparently realised the futility of transnational stigmatising and turned to more amiable discourse. Especially the southern regions were still aware of their dependence on the English market and unionist sentiments continued to exist regardless of the recent conflicts interpreted as a northern issue (cf. Shields 37). On many later occasions even the Celtic heritage as it had been restored by Macpherson was marketed as a pan-British phenomenon. Research is still

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<sup>6</sup> Curley 84 does not accept this notion and tries to plead for Johnson's scientific neutrality.

largely divided over this peculiar aspect, but arguably a rather balanced view on Macpherson's diplomatic potential should prove most rewarding.<sup>7</sup> Even granted that the general attitude towards England was not one of utter resentment, it cannot be argued away that, together with its old and distinct traditions, Scottish culture was on the edge of extinction, as Porter describes it (405). Not only in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century did writers from the Highlands stand no chance to gain a foothold within the English or European literary society (cf. Moore *Enlightenment* 26).

If we bear these factors in mind, the claim that Ossian simply resulted out of a nationwide "inferiority complex" must appear very plausible (Dundes 10). Several other scholars have applied similar psychological theories to Scotland and its cultural scene in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in order to present more scientific arguments for Ossian's success.<sup>8</sup> Without consistent myth enrooting the nation in an ancient past it was very hard, particularly for Highlanders, to develop a sound identity, that is, an appreciative view on their mother country. One massive side effect of this situation was that it made the Scottish society highly susceptible to a national narrative –read into Ossian's ancient lines– even though it apparently came out of nowhere. Everything else aside, it must be granted to Macpherson that he had timed his successive editions very well and indeed had his finger on the pulse of his country. He merely catered the demands of a population yearning for renewed self-esteem and a strong stance against its neighbour's dominance. The *Fingal* myth in particular promised to do away with England's so far uncompromised claim of the island's heroic past (cf. Simpson 113). Research unanimously agrees on the invigorating effect the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* had on Scotland's condition when they first came out in 1760. All of a sudden literary groups and different sciences sensed a chance to make themselves heard of in Britain and on the continent (cf. Ferguson 242); in the words of Moore:

"On the one hand Ossian is an attempt to bring some glory to the Scots Gaelic people staring down the barrel of cultural annihilation, on the other it is the high cultural prospect of a self-consciously provincial lowlands intelligensia aware [...] of the significant contribution it is able to make to British cultural life..." (75f.).

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<sup>7</sup> Whereas Curley, Newman and Hall still focus on the dividing features of the Ossianic texts, Shields and Moore (*Whig*) adopt a more bilateral perspective on Macpherson's aims.

<sup>8</sup> Also consult Dennis (p. 40 f.) to find stages of infantile development applied to Scotland's quest for cultural heritage.

Since it was preceding the centuries of Roman rule, Christian expansion and present English occupation, the “Celtic” civilization offered a way of promoting pure Scottishness untainted by external influences (cf. Simpson 114, cf. Hall 12).

### 3.2 Macpherson’s Therapy

As the following chapters will show, a massive craze about everything brought into connection with Celtic culture began in the aftermath of *the Works of Ossian*.<sup>9</sup> We can still find a lively scientific exchange down to the present day and a new branch of antiquarianism dedicated to research into ancient Gaelic material no matter from which part of the British Isles it originated. Given that Macpherson and writers standing in his mendaciously invented tradition depended on high circulation figures, it was impossible for any of them to bypass the English market. Bluntly hostile satire on the main customer was therefore not an option and should not be surmised as the texts’ intention. Akin to their purported temporal distance, the works would much rather try to stay clear of any obvious allusions towards sensitive political topics. Neither Unionism nor anti-English sentiment would have granted him universal acceptance. Especially the English readership was likely to sway between indignation and condescending pity. Fully aware of this quandary, Macpherson managed to navigate between any such obstacles and offered a generic blend completely unheard of so far. Naturally, that does not mean that they are entirely free of diachronic, cataphoric references. As for the setting, Macpherson’s major epics *Fingal* and *Temora* both are located on neutral Irish soil. This way, respective power relations between Scotland and England become less prominent and a broad readership may be addressed. The primordial and primitive makeup of the heroes in *Fingal* filled a gap between enlightened thinking and a sentimental, not yet fully fledged Romantic, movement (cf. Simpson 113-115). In this respect, Fingal was very much a prototypical character fit for the English educated circles of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (cf. Curley 124). He was an image for a primitive society set in an environment that had not been cultivated and tamed yet, thus was particularly wild and unpredictable. He himself was strong and heroic, yet suspiciously enlightened and rational in his conceptions of state and warfare. He was sublime just like the nature he was set into but very emotional in his relations to women and comrades. Macpherson had made his character accessible for all parties, the

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<sup>9</sup> See ch. VI.

Enlightenment thinkers as well as the antiquarian disciplines, the sentimental society as well as the heroic romance readership. In return, all these schools had provided material and templates to draw from while shaping the Celtic world, as will be shown in the next chapter. This great inclusiveness, however, had its downsides and lead to the result that Macpherson would be dragged into all kinds of battlegrounds in the decades to come (cf. Porter 423). It was impossible for him to anticipate the massive response his works would find. The tedious debate on hundreds of different intentions underlying his production is therefore unlikely to deliver satisfactory results. Two intentions only suffice to explain Macpherson's mind-set on publishing *Fingal*. On the one hand, he was determined to bring back the splendour of an ancient Celtic culture which had arguably been constitutive for western civilization and set Scotland's entitlement to it into stone. On the other he had to ensure his success with whatever readership he would reach in England, which in return would guarantee him quick proliferation (cf. Moore 52). A distant past when real boundaries and notions of nationality had not yet become established turned out to be just the right instrument for his purposes.

#### 4. Ossianic Literature. New Tradition Or a Well Camouflaged Scheme ?

##### 4.1 Classical Role Models

As soon as we accept *Fingal* as an individual piece of art, it is a reasonable step to set it into relation to other sources and ask the genre question anew. Role models for the ancient style Macpherson adopted and his explicit labelling of the text as epic exist in large numbers. To explore this further, the above mentioned assertion that Scots hardly knew any narratives situating them in the archipelago's distant past has to be taken with a grain of salt. Quasi-historical accounts of William Wallace and the leaders of his age had no solitary stance in the literary tradition of eighteenth-century Scotland. A couple of old legends might have been present in people's minds, which again may have acted as foundational myths in some form or another. When the focus lies primarily on pre-Christian myths, the legend of an ancient warrior-queen Scota might come up in one's studies. Collis recounts her voyage to pastures new and presents evidence reaching back into the 14<sup>th</sup> century, to the coronation of King Edward I, which is once again the time of William Wallace and Robert Bruce (cf. Collis 32f.). This narration of an ancient Egyptian

queen embarking on a voyage to Ireland and planting a new colony there resurfaced in time to encourage Scottish self-perception as a people devoid of any original connections to England. Adaptions of this myth occur at several stages of Scotland's literary history, but especially early historiography drew heavily on it for its straightforward foundational appeal.

By the time of Macpherson's production, antiquarian research into the origins of Scotland's inhabitants had long since commenced. The major figure in this field was George Buchanan, a historian of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, who wrote an entire history on the *res Scoticarum* bringing up the Picts as great ancestor to the domestic population (cf. Dennis 90). Important to note is that he situated the roots of the Scottish people in the Baltic countries and dismissed the claim that an entire civilization could be founded from one shipload of settlers. Scots and Englishmen therefore supposedly shared the same ancestor. It is striking to see in how far history is always dependent on ideological notions and is shaped to fit the author's intentions. Scholars of Macpherson's century were busy creating a genealogy of the "Caledonian race", a term which was coined by Tacitus in his *Agricola* to describe the inhabitants of today's Scottish Highlands (Tac. X, cf. Hall 10). David Malcom eventually even came to the conclusion that it was the original name of an indigenous purely Scottish race, which had not immigrated from anywhere whatsoever (cf. Roper 17). Ancient Druidism, as it had been described in some classical sources, had become a fashionable field of research and several stories dealt with this topic (cf. Collis 71f.). From our vantage point today, the distinction between myth and historical fact was still not that clear cut back then. As a result, both are relevant to this study as for their recording of common beliefs and ideological objective. For an eighteenth-century readership, countless dissertations and scientific histories on Scotland's past indeed presented facts and therefore were used in professional contexts only. It is unlikely that the common man related to these publications as sufficient material for national identity and their focus on tribal structures and migration must have made them infinitely less appealing than a King Arthur, William Wallace or queen Scota.

The opposite can be said of classical sources. They were still prevalent in the classroom and provided major motives for the arts. Latin was uncontested as crucial language in Scottish academia and elitist circles tried to imitate role models of antiquity on a regular basis.<sup>10</sup> Frankly, with upcoming Romanticist notions that would be reevaluated,

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Benjamin West's painting *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1766) and David Hume's remarks on the taste of contemporary readers: Hume, David. (*Of The*) *Standard of Taste*. Hoboken, N.J.: Generic NL Freebook Publisher, n.d. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. P.10. Web. 30 Jan.

but there is no doubt that Macpherson as a member of the Scottish gentry had been taught in a traditional manner (cf. Ferguson 53, 57; cf. Turner 284f.). In hindsight, of course there are plenty of details giving away the extensive reliance of *Fingal* on classical sources and would therefore unmask it as a modern production. However, we must not forget the aforementioned blurriness of generic boundaries and people's different relationship to literature at that time. The success of Macpherson is neither owed to the Scottish readers' gullibility nor their rudimentary education. In fact, his texts resort to the classical tradition very wittily and explicit references towards ancient epic are at times even turned into evidence for his pseudo-scientific cause. *Fingal* will serve as the subject of analysis here since it is the text most directly working with the epic predecessors. In that sense, it will provide an exemplary catalogue of common motives and techniques setting it in the tradition of classical literature. *Fingal* was the launching pad for Macpherson's career as a historical forger with extraordinary creativity. It was published within a year after fellow academics had made him realise the potential underlying fudged translations of Gaelic sources. He asserted that his epic text had originated from extensive research in the Scottish Highlands in search of authentic ancient sources.

A very promising glossary in the 1761 edition immediately familiarises the reader with numerous parallels to be found between Ossian and the ancient poets Virgil and Homer.<sup>11</sup> Footnotes are additionally meant to facilitate the direct comparison of passages in his "Celtic" Homer and the ancient community of practice. At first glance, a reader privy to Macpherson's forgery might be perplexed with the author's foolishness since he has apparently blown his cover. This, however, would once again mean to read this work by contemporary standards. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century it proved as a coup de main as there was a commonly held view that artists of comparable genius tend to pursue parallel lines of thought (cf. Moore Comparison 174). There could be no doubt that Ossian's talent must have been a match for Vergil and Homer because of his frequent reliance on similar constructions and motives despite being ignorant of their works. The ingenuity of these critical footnotes then was actually twofold. Macpherson managed to bring his purported bard Ossian in the realm of celebrated classics but at the same time he managed to distance his own persona from the production, thereby making it appear more authentic. A critic analysing the work for potential references, he was unlikely to be suspected as its inventor.

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<sup>11</sup> In the following, any citations on Macpherson's text *Fingal* will refer to the 1762 edition printed for T. Becket and P.A. de Hondt, in the Strand.



Moreover, even as readers of the present day we have to confess to our research still falling prey to Macpherson's design. As he places allusions to ancient epic throughout the text, he manages to uphold a hollow façade when it comes to genre. Without giving it a second thought, the majority of scholars so far have simply taken Macpherson's epic claim for granted (cf. Ferguson 238).<sup>12</sup> The stylisation of *Fingal* as genuine epic has led to many oversimplified conclusions and still left it with the undisputed grandeur of that genre (cf. Moore Comparison 175). Labelling it a children's fairy tale would never have evoked such lofty connotations in the sense of calling Ossian "Celtic Homer" (Roper 17). Macpherson must have known describing the work as an epic to be a risky step, but the immense effect it would have on the circulation figures apparently made it seem worth taking to him. Already anticipating scepticism about numerous classical insertions in a supposedly primitive work, he explains:

Some people may imagine that the allusions to the Roman history might have been industriously inserted into the poems, to give them the appearance of antiquity. This fraud must then have been committed at least three ages ago ... (*Fingal* ix).

All these circumstances indeed call for an analysis of certain aspects making scholars stick to the classical terminology, which will then be followed by several considerations rendering an alternative definition of genre more logical.

On the very surface, there are several themes meant to enroot *Fingal* in the Homeric tradition. The hero himself is a character fashioned very much in the style of a cunning Ulysses or pious Aeneas. Very much acting in the tradition of Virgil, Macpherson took a hero already somewhat established in the canon and crafted a new narrative around him (cf. Williams 27f.). In a similar way this hero is constantly suffering from agonizing loss (cf. Shields 215). What is the lost home Troy for Aeneas and the quest for Ithaca in the *Odyssey* becomes the loss of one's culture for Fingal and his bard Ossian (cf. Stafford 34; cf. Reed 73). The Highlands' army on its mission in Ireland is displaced from its native land. Quite figuratively, the Gaelic nations Scotland and Ireland are forced to fight a war against an external threat. This might appear as a diachronic adaption of the Viking raids at first, but soon one can see through the actual function of the northern enemy. In the sense of *debellare superbos parcere subiectis*, which translates roughly as "to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud," this invasion from abroad sets the scene for Fingal to display his superior humanity (Virgil VI 853). He only uses his power to "assist the feeble" and defend the weak, so even the foreign aggressor can count on his mercy (*Fingal* [VI]

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<sup>12</sup> Some of the more recent scholars to do so: Leask p. 189; Döring p. 112.

64). At the same time repeated mourning for lost friends and relatives somehow disturbs the heroic appearance and many critics have judged his emotionality to reach deeper than simple bereavement. Fingal conceives his people and his culture as one of a kind and can foresee its oblivion (cf. Koehler 207; cf. Shields 212). The eighteenth-century reader knows about the hardships the Highlands are yet to experience in the course of history, and so does Fingal. Some proleptic remarks stand witness to his knowledge exceeding the narrative frame. He bemoans the loss of his youngest son Ryno, who has been buried right at the battleground. He can already sense that the “sons of the feeble,” the Irish, will not remember their debt owed to Scotland for Fingal’s support (Fingal [VI] 82). The Irish captain Cuchullin, who attempts to return to the fight but eventually surrenders to his uneasiness, is an allegoric reference to Ireland’s role in the Jacobite uprisings (cf. Fingal [IV] 60; cf. Hayton 32). This incorporation of references to a modern present into narratives acting in a distant past has widely been acknowledged as one of the innovations brought on by the *Aeneis*. There the ornaments on the hero’s shield allude to the battle of Actium several centuries later (Virgil VIII 671-731). An imperial mission as Virgil claimed it for the Romans has often been read into Macpherson’s works (cf. Moore Whig 9). Fingal supposedly not only helps the Irish allies to defeat a foreign army, but he takes Ireland by storm. In consequence the Highland culture was thought to dominate the weak Gaels on the neighbouring island and set its own standards for being “Celtic”. This perception is related to the self-perception of Rome’s destiny as *imperium sine fine* or “unlimited empire,” which could be deduced from the Virgilian source (Virgil I 279). In the case of Gaelic culture, however, a similar destiny would be shared by Scotland and Ireland alike at the end of the day. The focus of research has obviously been off target since an evaluating perspective on foreign culture has indeed been crucial for classical epic and is not at all missing in *Fingal* (cf. Turner 306). The Nordic army is what most resembles queen Dido’s empire in the *Aeneis* and several exotic civilisations of the *Odyssey*. Swaran, his tribe and especially his sister demarcate critical stages in Fingal’s development. The exotic culture is tantalising the hero but still, it remains incomprehensible and even harmful to him; we only need to look at the traumatising end of his love-affair with Agandecca (Fingal [III] 37f.). Virgil’s hero also had to escape the tender grip of his beloved queen in order to fulfil his people’s destiny, to which he then yields but not without signalling protest (Virgil IV 279f.). With regard to Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Macpherson incorporates both into his work, a quest on foreign ground and a decisive battle brought about by a giant fleet (cf. Porter 405). Furthermore, *Fingal* ends in

the final battle of the two major antagonists and the resulting question of mercy. The pairs Aeneas-Turnus, Achilles- Hector, Fingal- Swaran all find a different solution for this moral conflict. Fingal is placed at the bottom step of an anti-climax of humanity in this case. Where Achilles kills his nemesis straight away, Aeneas has second thoughts but eventually proceeds to the same action (Homer XXII 326; Virgil XII 939). Fingal then does not kill his opponent but the memory of his former love causes him to spare Swaran, who has no further means to defend himself (Fingal [VI] 64f.). He even decides upon a truce and parts with the foreign people as allies.

Still, Macpherson did not stop just on the level of content. Ossian himself is turned into an epical device because his bardic tales guarantee eternal fame for Fingal and his creator, respectively (cf. Doreste 3). Macpherson knew about this traditional view on epic and had his hero explicitly ponder on its immortalising means (Fingal [V] 66). The equation of bardic song with epic poetry granted Macpherson the authorship of another *carmen perpetuum*, an eternal poem (cf. Hall 19, Ovid I 4). Moving on to the text's stylistic makeup, scholarly work is facilitated by the fact that most of them appear in bulks, which makes the analysis of crucial passages even more feasible (cf. Moore Comparison 172). The vivid description of Cuchullin's coach may at this point serve as an in depth example accumulated classical stylistic devices and epic motives in different passages of *Fingal*.

The car, the car of battle comes, like the flame of death; the rapid car of Cuchullin, the noble son of Semo. It bends behind like a wave near a rock; like the golden mist of the heath. Its sides are embossed with stones, and sparkle like the sea round the boat of night. Of polished yew is its beam, and its seat of the smoothest bone. The sides are replenished with spears; and the bottom is the foot-stool of heroes. Before the right side of the car is seen the snorting horse. The high-maned, broad-breasted, proud, high-leaping strong steed of the hill. Loud and resounding is his hoof; (Fingal [I] 11).

It is evident that the Scandinavian messenger reports in the style of *ekphrasis* traditionally used to describe locations and objects of great importance. Anaphoric sentence beginnings put special emphasis on the involvement of the speaker and his awe towards the coach he describes. The material quality is described by several parallelisms using an archaic prepositional postmodifier, "of". Comparisons to natural wonders are a typical epic device to mark the stylised language in poetry, however here it is used to draw a lively picture of the Sublime. This supernatural appearance is ascribed to both, the coach and Irish nature and in effect both entities melt into one. Cuchullin and his vehicle become the incarnated depiction of Ireland and its rugged hills, dark meadows and threatening coast. Accordingly,

the coach is embellished with stones and many spears which poke into the air like high grass blades. The approach of the entire apparatus is described as resembling the movement of “a wave near a rock”, that is the wild clash of nature’s forces. Like the surf this mighty force is yet controlled and regulated by other natural elements, in this case bones and wood. These elements, taken together, intensify the impression of supernatural and awesome nature in all its facets. Not surprisingly, the horse is depicted in a similar fashion by use of many epithets. What has been “sleek kine of shambling gait“ in the *Odyssey* is made a “broad-breasted, proud etc.” steed in *Fingal* (Homer IX 45).

#### 4.2 Contemporary Role Models

Even with everything mentioned above in mind, one cannot help but encounter just as many differences to the ancient genre. Macpherson did not follow through with his endeavour to establish a work entirely in the ancient fashion. This does not imply that he hoped to do so; on the contrary, he intentionally deviated in many aspects to make it appear more ‘Celtic’, which came to mean authentic. What has cost him much credibility – in the eyes of Samuel Johnson and others– is that he was not able to restrain himself from incorporating contemporary, eighteenth-century elements into his work. This way he created a hybrid, hard to classify in an adequate way. Immediately after the publication of *the Works of Ossian*, readers were startled by the effeminate nature of the protagonists (cf. Potkay 125, cf. Shields 54). Effeminacy had been what the English charged Scottish clans with when their military had been defeated and disarmed in the aftermath of Culloden. The crown had lost any political trust in Scotland’s role as a union member and thus increasingly fell back on methods which had turned out effective in Ireland so far. Meanwhile, the literary society of Britain had turned its back on sober enlightenment theory and studied more emotional literature with great interest. This sentimental literature slowly developed into one distinguishing characteristic of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and partly laid the foundation for the big Romantic era, which was about to fascinate Europe in the decades to come (cf. Moore 132; cf. Potkay 123f.). Macpherson was heavily influenced by this particular trend and readily adopted many motives of sentimentalism. As a result, he managed to turn a certain conduct originally meant as derogatory feature into something of value for the entire nation. Sentimentalism and Scotland became inseparably linked and still continue to be so in the eyes of today’s scholarship. The big readership of Goethe’s *Werther* or the refined European citizen in general would soon be eager to study the

chivalry and mores of Macpherson's ancient Celts. (cf. Doreste 6; cf. Shields 53). Sentiment was already quite salient in the English elitist circles in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which brings Curley to the conclusion that a high level of melancholia was specifically incorporated into *Fingal* to meet their expectations (24). Fingal does not fight unless he is forced to, he does not demand masculine composure from his followers and he consoles the ones beaten down (Fingal [V] 64, [VI] 78f., [VI] 84f.). What is more, love is described in vivid colours while battle scenes show by far less bloodshed than any of their classical counterparts (cf. Moore Comparison 174). Virgil's fourth book of the *Aeneis* still depicts Dido and Aeneas as lovers by Juno's divine consent. Every tiny bit of emotion in their love adventure is left to the woman, while Aeneas in his plump, masculine manner does not even find the right words to say goodbye. Ossian's vocabulary on the other hands is very different. He depicts the hero Fingal awestruck by the appearance of Agandecca, who "loveliness surrounds as light" (Fingal [II] 34). Accordingly, in battle Fingal is not the one to drive swords into his enemies but he 'breaks shields in twain' (Fingal [V] 65).<sup>13</sup>

In his actions and manners he is a "noble savage", a term coined by John Dryden in his dramatic version of an uncorrupted human being (cf. Simpson 119). He is primitive on the surface but therefore honest and uncorrupted at the core. Nature on the other hand stands in stark contrast to Fingal's refined behaviour. The hero's actions are marked by humbleness and magnanimity whereas nature seems to be threatening and unpredictable. These are the moments when the work breathes the "sublime spirit" most obviously (Porter 404). Countless similes are meant to convey the asserted relationship between the Celts and nature; one of deep reverence. Nature does come up as a theme in ancient epic as well, but never is it granted an inherent power. This leads over to the crucial issue of supernatural power. It has been perceived as Macpherson's most radical breach with classical tradition that he left out any traces of divine action (cf. Moore 38). Where are the Fates deciding when to cut the threat of life? Where are the gods interfering when the hero is getting to much astray? Macpherson himself felt the need to comment on this purported ancient practice when he writes: "Had Ossian brought down gods, as often as Homer hath done, to assist his heroes, this poem had not consisted of eulogiums on his friends, but of hymns to these superior beings" (Fingal vi). Without doubt a well-conceived argument, nevertheless it is steeped in notions, which had evolved during the Enlightenment period (cf. Ferguson 206; cf. Curley 181). Unlike classical heroes, Fingal plans independently and takes responsibility for his actions. A search for religious rituals will be without success.

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<sup>13</sup> Unlike Achilles, who "pierces" his foes (Homer XXII 326) or Aeneas who "buries his sword" in Turnus (Virgil XII 950).

Instead of the gods, humanity as a whole is worshipped in countless feasts and hunts. Enlightenment thinking is also mirrored in the depiction of primitive tribal structures ascribed to third-century-Scotland. These communities were celebrated as the first traces of modern democracy, which still heavily depended on leading figures.

Especially Fingal's affected demeanour as noble ruler of a united people only makes sense when we read it against an eighteenth-century background. Moreover, the primitive ages could pride themselves on various other achievements in the eyes of the Romantics. The primordial clan structure had allegedly been an uncorrupted community ruled under a philanthropic agenda (cf. Höfele 4). Simplicity had seemingly liberated life from all hardships and proved as the key to happy coexistence (cf. Potkay 122). Form and style of the text are notably shaped in accordance with this primitivism claim (cf. Döring 118). The melodic hexameter of classical epic is replaced by a very bumpy, uneven meter. Macpherson explains this with the lack of literary conventions among the bards (cf. Fingal xii). Owing to so many unconventional features, there has been a heated discussion about the text's self-referential labelling as epic. Many scholars have attested Macpherson fuzziness in the sense of simply incorporating too many features from diverging camps. Fingal is therefore seen as crossing boundaries of several eras and literary genres. His work contains references to ancient pastoral poetry, annalistic historiography and, of course, the epic genre (cf. Porter 406,424). As if that was not enough, modern conventions shine through parallel to novelistic aspects and motives of chivalric romance writing (cf. Stafford 37; cf. Moore 32).

Even though Macpherson always insisted on his being merely a faithful translator of the text, it had been entirely on his account that *Fingal* was classified as epic text. With the story unfolding around a semi-historic event and moderate mythological alterations, the romance reading of *Fingal* seems to be a very plausible approach, instead. The reader is presented with a very artistically arranged version of Ireland hosting very developed characters. Nonetheless, there is a hue of common sense in Fingal's and Cuchullin's ways of thinking and their humbleness in the face of great fame makes them more accessible than ancient heroes. They have flaws and are not masters in concealing them, they sometimes struggle with their fate and love affects them as severely as does the loss of friends in combat. Due to their purported distant past, they appear exotic and mysterious, their behaviour on the other hand makes them role models for modern civic virtue. In this context, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* comes to mind as a similar stock type. The exceptional position of virtuous Fingal does not necessarily push the boundaries of the very flexible

romance label and *Fingal* has been defined as a chivalric romance by Moore (33, 35). Very much in line with these conventions is the incorporation of contemporary issues into an unfamiliar context, as explored at an earlier stage of this paper.<sup>14</sup> This way, conflicts and power relations between Ireland, England and Scotland are made accessible for a diachronic interpretation. The reader of Macpherson's text should bear in mind that the text can be analysed in two dimensions when it comes to generic categories and influences. The author himself would deliberately lead his reader on the wrong track of understanding it as an epic and appreciate it accordingly. Macpherson was very competent in imitating many features of the Virgilian and Homeric templates. His glossary even increased the chance of Ossian being celebrated as epic poet, meanwhile distancing the real author from the text. Still, this alone would not give enough credit to the fact that *Fingal* is steeped in the literary conventions of the eighteenth century and determined to please the taste of British readers in every way. As the century saw neoclassical praise for ancient sources slowly on the decline, the author managed to give his pseudo-ancient sources some new polish.

## 5. From Inferiority Complexes to "Celtomania"

The success of Macpherson's *Works of Ossian* was arguably the outcome of a cunning play with genre conventions. It can be safely said that his blend of several conventions evolved as a highly influential literary field. The multifaceted tradition which commenced in the aftermath of just this one text collection implies that Macpherson has indeed established an innovative genre, if not an entire discipline, all by himself. He stands initially to a tradition of Celtic productions in a fashion meant to resemble the bard Ossian (cf. Moore Comparison 176). Even if there had been historical interests in Britain's pre-history before Macpherson, as it was discussed in chapter V.1, the milestone passed by Macpherson encouraged others to imitate his work. Many took part in the massive scientific debate which broke loose shortly after *Fingal* had been published and which still kept smouldering well into the twentieth century. The first discipline to become fascinated with a genuinely Celtic past was historiography, which was driven by scientific interest in the matter. A league of scholars spearheaded by Samuel Johnson himself set out to explore this ancient civilisation, which had apparently been overlooked for so many centuries (cf.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. ch V.1.

Thomson 17f.). Extensive field work in the Scottish Highlands eventually led him to the conclusion that as far as the historical Fingal and his followers were concerned, no tangible source might testify their existence. Moreover, his quest for written documents in an ancient Scottish language, Earse, was to no avail. Everything is meticulously documented in his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. What gave them all further incentive was a pseudo-historical treatise on the history of Ireland and Scotland which Macpherson's namesake, Sir John Macpherson, issued as some sort of co-production in 1768 to provide the scientific background for Fingal and his Celtic society. In the wake of these historical controversies, an ambitious contest between historians of the British Isles broke loose as Curley reports it (158). The Irish camp, represented by Thomas Leland, was eager to make good for Ireland's weakened position by forging the "Celtic" origins once again in favour of the Emerald Isle and the Scota myth. He largely drew on the dissertation by Charles O'Connor, who ironically had not once used the term *Celtic* in 1753. John Pinkerton published his history in 1789 promoting his key assertions that Scotland had primarily been a colony of the Goths and presenting the entire ancient world in a far less appreciative way. A Scotsman, his change of beliefs might have originated from the Highland Society's resolution that the *Works of Ossian* had been fake. Edward Gibbon then underlined once again England's leading role when it came to source material and scientific records. Based on whatever historical information had been compiled so far, he published his opus *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776 to 1789. It covered in passing significant bits of history with respect to Gaul and Britannia.

Universities took this resurfaced interest in the British Isles' pre-history as an opportunity to breathe new life into their academia, which had been stuck reiterating the history of ancient Rome and comparing it to contemporary history. This new field even spurred cultural exchange to a large degree and led to the foundation of the Highland Society in London, which was dedicated to the preservation of Scottish history and tradition. It became increasingly evident that through all scientific branches people had become entangled in yet another Renaissance: a Nordic Renaissance (Hunter 64). The focus shifted from the traditional high civilisations to a new role model culture, which was conceived indigenous to the world north of the Alps. Now narrations about the Vikings, Angles and Saxon could contribute to the historical memory of Britain. The high culture of an ancient Roman or Hellenistic empire suddenly inherited new characteristics in the eyes of scientists, primarily deprecatory ones. Their architectural skills were re-interpreted as vain pomp, their society merely revealed as merely brutish and crude under a camouflage



of education and nice appearances. Thomas Percy hints at all these aspects in his *Northern Antiquities*, published in 1770. Only after the fall of the Roman Empire were the regions in the Celtic heartland enabled to return to their original state of social equality and “spirit of gallantry.”, as he puts it (Percy 176).

Certainly, popularity of this new mode did not restrict to the historiographic field alone, otherwise Döring’s postulation of a century’s “Celtomania” would not be justified (111). In reality, Ossian won the entire literary scene in Scotland, England and beyond within only a couple of years. Widely distributed hints at a utilization of the bardic myth can be found (cf. Shield 212, cf. Porter 412). Sentimental novels and romances for example had not just acted as a model for Macpherson’s work but became themselves increasingly popular in the aftermath. Of special interest here are the narratives about indigenous tribes in the new world, which were all of a sudden perceived in a new light (cf. Bold 472). Maria Child’s *Hobomok* might work as a sufficient example here because it granted the natives intelligence and an extraordinary symbiosis with nature similar to Macpherson’s heroes (cf. Shields 22). Even ballads and songs ventured into this new style. John Clare’s *from Child Harold* makes repeated use of such stylistic devices as they were particularly associated with *Fingal* and in consequence were highly esteemed as ‘sublime’.<sup>15</sup> The stanzas 145-148, “My life hath been one love [...] My life hath been one chain of contradictions [...] But that my life hath had some strong convictions,” bears structural resemblances to the above mentioned description of Cuchullin’s car in *Fingal*: “The car, the car of battle comes, like the flame of death; the rapid car of Cuchullin” (Clare 183f.; *Fingal* [I] 11). This “Ossian run”, an expression of the bard’s undeveloped archaic meter, was commonly used together with reputedly Celtic motives to generate the intended outward appearance (cf. Porter 410). Accordingly, in many contemporary English poems the preposition “of” as part of the postmodifier becomes fashionable. The “boat of night” is imitated by Clare’s “hill of fern” in stanza 173 (*Fingal* [I] 11, Clare 184). Even on the continent, poet’s societies understood themselves as successors of the Celtic bard, especially so the German Göttinger Bund of the Storm and Stress movement.<sup>16</sup> *Ossian*, just like *Celtic*, slowly became a quality marker, so people who had opposed Macpherson’s editions for their emotionality and effeminacy had to watch these factors becoming major selling points in the decades to follow.

Not restricted to the literary domain only, the development of new markets in the wake of Celticism has not slipped the attention of scholars. Leask has arranged a collection

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Newman for a survey on Scottish ballads and songs in the perceived Ossianic fashion.

<sup>16</sup> See ch. X.2.

of eighteenth-century reports and journals by scholars who got behind a large-scale swindle in the marketing of sites in Scotland. Entrepreneurs in the Highlands had quickly sensed the economic value underlying the Celtic heritage debate. According to these sources, nothing other than a tourist industry was well on its way of taking root in this area (cf. Leask 184f). The main objective was of course to earn some money with the debate surrounding Ossian's historicity. For that reason places had first to be renamed and promoted accordingly. Caves turned into "Fingal's" caves and former Roman burial sites acquired a Celtic label so they would entertain numerous excursions undertaken to follow the ancient hero's footsteps (cf. Leask 187f.). Especially for women the chance to visit the scenery of "Ossian's land" first hand seems to have been thrilling. Several members of the Blue Stockings and other learned women of England's high society embarked on trips to Scotland carrying an edition of *The Works of Ossian* with them (cf. Hagglund 25f./77). On the way one obviously had to wear what was perceived authentic plaid and Tartan pattern, another cultural myth unmasked by Roper as early as 1983. According to his research, the origins of this garb lie in the 18<sup>th</sup> century's military sector and reports of renewed attention appeared once again in these lively last decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Highland Society struggled to achieve legal recognition for it as a national dress (cf. Roper 21/26). Even without any evidence of *Fingal* action-figurines we can assume the evolution of a real fan culture around Ossian and his poetry, which exceeded its literary boundaries and reached dimensions similar to today's celebration of Harry Potter in Europe. To determine whether or not that was the first real craze around a fictional character is beyond the scope of this paper, but arguably it must have been the first culture established around a non-religious entity, which exceeded national boundaries to such an extent.

## 6. The Representation of Ireland in *Fingal*

With the influence of Macpherson's work on Scotland's self-perception and its relations to England being sufficiently laid out, reception within an Irish context still requires further attention. One way of reading *Fingal* and its hero's battle against an intruding power is the one of a re-enacted battle for Scotland's nationhood. The final victory then is deemed a worthy alternative ending to the Scottish defeat of 1745, the repercussions of which people of this century still felt in their daily lives (cf. Nagy 440f.). This theory, as appealing as it may sound, ignores the crucial fact that the great battle in

Macpherson's text is not carried out on Scottish soil. The Irish troops, who have been defeated and disgracefully turned their backs on the enemy, have called for Scottish assistance and now watch their ally finishing the job for them. As a reader, sometimes one cannot help but interpret this as the Irish receiving their fair share in Scotland's rally for retaliation against its neighbours. Ireland's inactivity in the years leading up to the 1745 rebellions might be seen as the integral reason for a Scottish grudge and Macpherson's work merely one form of catharsis. The relationship between Ireland and the Jacobite cause has found resonance in the research of Ó Ciardha and it is quite noteworthy that the general sentiment in England's first colony was far more supportive of Scotland than it might appear on first sight. His book states several reasons why Irish troops did not take action once Charles Edwards entered Scotland. England's massive military presence on Irish soil prevented recruitment to the same extent as the lack of support from the Catholic continental allies did (cf. Ó Ciardha 272). Regardless of Ireland's passive role, literary productions in favour of the rebellion were published with unvarying zeal expressing the country's desperate longing for a shift in policies towards Catholicism. It is highly unlikely that rather amiable relations between Scotland and Ireland deteriorated in the face of Charles's defeat and even less so with regard to the Ossian myth.

The fact that Macpherson could only resort to oral sources for a myth that had already been diligently codified in Ireland centuries ago did not in the least affect the power of his production (cf. Shields Female 212).<sup>17</sup> This entire narrow perspective on distinguishing features of the Works of Ossian has always remained in the sphere of gut feeling and therefore produced rather shallow conclusions. In Hugh Trevor Roper and Thomas M. Curley, Macpherson's work has found staunch opponents to this day. One an Englishman, the other a US citizen, both connects the outside perspective on Scotland and their interpretations drawn from the context of Macpherson's production, namely his first-hand experience of the Highland Clearances. What they make of the entire work in consequence is bogus literature largely stolen from the Irish tradition and an attempt to restore Scotland's reputation through an imperial narrative (cf. Roper 17, cf. Curley 6/23f.). The other extreme then is to unite the Celtic nations Ireland and Scotland against a shared enemy, England. Döring does so and refers to the equally distorted identity of both countries oppressed under a hegemonic quasi-coloniser (cf. Döring 115). These interpretations altogether lack in balance and cannot offer a key to the entire narrative. Furthermore, they tend to disregard all the factors that made Macpherson's legacy so

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Porter 410, Moore 240 on the positioning of *the Works of Ossian* within an existent tradition and the respective borrowings from Irish traditions.

valuable for the Romantic era and literary studies of the time. While the one issue of authenticity is emphatically reiterated, there is hardly enough acknowledgement of the immense promotional effect that the figure Ossian had on the entire literature coming from what is now the Celtic Fringe (cf. Curley 27). Regardless of any hierarchies underlying Macpherson's setting or the Irish claim for a 'copyright' on the Fingal persona, both nations now had a means to market their culture to a new extent. The renewed interest in ancient history prior to the Roman invasion of Britain also influenced the research of antiquarians in Ireland. Since Roman troops had never entered the island, remnants of the "Celtic" civilisation were to be found, if anywhere, on Irish soil. Fortunately, the Irish could draw from an infinitely larger stock of sources as the Christian middle-ages had left a large part of pagan culture intact and many monasteries had even seen to its proper recording into their codices.<sup>18</sup> Early on Ireland was eager to incorporate its ancient history into a European rather than an insular British context. Several theories were combined to argue for Ireland's prehistoric independence to the rest of the British Isles. The old assumption of "Celtic" invasions from mainland Europe, primarily from the Iberian coast and Brittany, asserted roots to the south-eastern European seaboard. Few ties to Rome had arguably made the insular population thrive without external interference just as continuous Catholicism had done in opposition to the Anglican faith.

## 7. The Difficult Relationship between Ireland and Its Past. Coping with Inferiority

Interests into a holistic coverage of Irish national past even today still tends to evoke an unwelcome memory of the colonial status under the English crown. Exactly there does commercial interest in history coverage end, and so does the popular threshold of acceptance. In effect, the national identity of today still remains in a schizophrenic state, on the one hand retracing its core roots back to European spirituality and DNA, still shifting a great share of economic relations to transatlantic partners on the other (cf. Nash 26).<sup>19</sup> The comical effect of such an ideological divide is nothing new to cultural scientists. Culture, identity and economy have been witnessed becoming awfully mixed up in Ireland when people are observed performing traditional dances in celebration of the Telecom privatisation in 1999 (cf. Coleman 175f.). Regardless of such patronising views, the

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ch. III.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Keohane 3-5 / 82 f.

negation of English interference in the island's past, and accordingly, in its self-perception since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, does have profound reasons. Good trade relations with the Roman Empire and a smooth adoption of Christian doctrine as a national belief system are integral parts of national pride. The fact that the native Gael language nowadays officially equals English in official matters has also contributed its share (cf. Reynolds 387). From an historical perspective "Ireland never felt the direct influence of a race more advanced than herself [until the coming of the Normans]" (Ó Corráin 1). George Russel as speaker for the Gaelic League already kept propagating the notion of Ireland's continuous resistance against foreign domination over the centuries (cf. Reynolds 385). In order not to contribute yet another study to the already extensively researched Irish Literary Revival, this is only meant as a complimentary note. Irish identity in its composition is recusant to accepting the role of a victim. What Liviu defines as a cultural policy of amnesia permeates the entire historical representation and collective memory of English rule over the island (140). In the Royal Irish Academy's monumental opus on Ireland's art and architecture the chapter about 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century is kept strikingly short since contributions within that timespan have a tradition of being disregarded as English. Subsequently, they lack extensive evidence (Moss 6). The Irish self-perception as independent partner for global trade does not tolerate periods of suppression and dependence on the ideological agenda. In the same way it is the notion of being a decisive constituent of the Celtic Fringe that has always welded the population together in times of struggle. In a psychological way, the notion of Celtic roots has become this nation's coping strategy in functioning as a repository for encouraging cultural assets (cf. Zaumseil 94). Both Scotland and Ireland found themselves in an ideological crisis ever since England had interfered with their independence. A sense of inferiority in the face of the other's power and quick development made them equally susceptible to the Celtic tradition, which began to spill over from Scotland towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Ireland's development of national identity, therefore, was a particularly long and difficult process and the history of it reaches back into the times of Henry VIII. During the Reformation and the dissolution of Catholic monasteries in Ireland, the first important cornerstones for Irish identity formation were laid. The 16<sup>th</sup> century was one of dire suppression for the island. English propagandists recruited by the monarchy were busy defining their neighbours by means of their barbaric ancestry. In seeking to devalue the Irish as primitive rural and different, writers were once again found recording pagan rites and sites eventually handing their results over to the clergy and providing them with new

targets for the Anglican mission (cf. McCurtain 371-372). It appears plausible that also the modern notion of an Irish nation state, as we define it today, might have developed within that period. The Tudor monarchy frankly played a key role in nourishing such an egocentric concept on the archipelago as a means to sustain the own contentious position (cf. Schabert 10). The Irish, on the other hand, gratefully adopted many traits they were associated with and increasingly celebrated this new coinage of a “Celtic nation”, even though it had been a derogatory measure (cf. Carroll 101; cf. MacCurtain 376).<sup>20</sup> The perception of being different was at this point a counterforce to the imperial power. England’s determination to break Catholicism in its first colonial territory grew over the following centuries.

Ireland’s incorporation of a reputedly “Celtic” legacy into its national self-perception really began when Romanticism had really gained momentum on the British Isles. It changed the perspectives of readers and writers for good and motifs such as the sublime and the supernatural prevailed throughout the transitional phase into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Macpherson’s texts had introduced an innovative set of themes and especially Ireland was turned into the main venue for Celtic heroism and natural wonder. The portrayal of mystic Irish nature and purported Celtic ritualism made the country an imaginary treasure trove for artistic inspiration, especially in continental Europe and Britain (cf. Carroll 101). At the same time, antiquarian circles were created as a pastime for the highly educated Victorian middle-class and urban institutions dedicated their fundraising to the study of previous centuries. It was not long before this particular branch eventually spilled over to Ireland (cf. Nash 21; cf. Patten 16, 161). In Dublin, the young Royal Irish Academy became generally involved in archaeological projects, which would soon prove as Ferguson’s field of expertise (cf. Denman 41). Even the Protestant population of the North-East sensed the opportunity of contributing a major project to the nation’s modernisation and conducted the first Irish Ordnance survey. Originally commissioned by the English Whig government, the survey followed the aim of discovering and locating natural resources to be extracted. However, it soon proved contributory to both sides, the English imperial and the Irish national, since infrastructure in certain territories improved (cf. Patten 78f). On the academic level, Ireland had already taken up the fashion of reworking history, and historical novels such as *The Wild Irish Girl* or *Castle Rackrent* were gaining momentum (cf. Foster 3). Irish culture and tradition suddenly reached a new importance, accounted for moral integrity and elevated the

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<sup>20</sup> On the charges of effeminacy raised against Ireland: cf. Schabert p. 25-26.

protagonists in these narrations over their foreign contemporaries. The initial attempt to rework history in a new way, however, had already shaken scientific circles of the archipelago. James MacPherson had broadly stirred awareness of a forgotten past (c.f. Graham 73). Since it transferred ancient virtues and literary genius to the Scottish homeland it had quickly changed the way Scots conceived of themselves in. Also Irish disciplines readily joined the celebration of insular pre-history and by 1808 the new Gaelic Society of Dublin had also contributed their first edition on ancient myth (cf. Pereira 70). In this respect, Samuel Ferguson merely took up an already flourishing tradition and was eager to make the merits of Celtic literature in the style of Ossian his own. The situation in nineteenth-century Ireland was very different when Ferguson decided to write in Macpherson's tradition. Unlike the *Works of Ossian*, his poems did not address a country disheartened by its loss of culture but one that had kept defending its autonomous stance even in the face of recent crises. The pre-Christian ancestry was still recognizable in rites and other performances although it had not adopted the prestigious Celtic label before the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## 8. Ferguson's Adoption of a Pseudo-Celtic Tradition Victorian High Culture and

### 8.1 Popular Literary Genres in Nineteenth-Century Ireland

Aware of the problems that might occur by establishing one coherent historical storyline, Ferguson turned to a less restrictive arrangement and loosely assembled single lyrical texts. Since partial indignation over Macpherson's pageant of Celtic history was gaining strength, he had to take precautions. In his hesitant editions, Ferguson eradicated any claims of the works' authenticity by explicitly ascribing them to his hand. He managed to faithfully edit his works without provoking an immediate debate about his texts authenticity. First, by publishing single poems in periodicals he could hope for feedback and adapt his style to the readers' demands. Moreover, since many poems were equipped with historiographic prefaces, he clearly distinguished his literature from Romantic fiction and ascribed it antiquarian value in exactly the same way as Macpherson had done. Scholars have been very careful in their classification of Ferguson's opus and "narrative history" is the term most commonly used with reference to his antiquarian grandeur (Foster 2, 7; Graham 1). In his own times, Ferguson remained unaffected by any charges

questioning the factuality of his writings or the authenticity of his alleged sources (cf. Graham 99-101). Generic boundaries still followed the line of classical conventions. It shows once again that this purported Celtic mode was completely compliant with European tradition. As a writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ferguson could experience the potential underlying such endeavours into a nation's primordial history first-hand his continental contemporaries being possessed by Ossian.<sup>21</sup> Knowingly he helped Ireland's claim for an autonomous position as a nation with cultural heritage but in this decision was far from nationalist inspired (cf. Denman 2). The thought of being one of the first scientifically motivated writers to tread the path of foundational Irish narration must have been very appealing in itself.

What has been discovered about ideological pitfalls in the preceding chapters can be transferred to Samuel Ferguson in just the same way. Yeats explicitly praised him once as "the most Celtic" writer of his century (cf. Yeats 103). But just as a uniform Celtic culture is only a construct, Ferguson's proclamation of it was a convenient conception made use of by his more nationalist posterity. This does not mean that the author himself did discard the broad notion of a communal Irish heritage reaching back to the "Celtic" civilization. On the contrary, as an antiquarian he was fascinated by it, and as a man of letters he was particularly enchanted by Gaelic myths such as *Deirde* or *Congal* (cf. Pereira 70). Ferguson's literary legacy is, strictly speaking, nothing distinctly Irish. He was rather influenced by a trend that had spread all over Europe's cultural scene and accordingly produced in its style. What makes Samuel Ferguson exceptional is his incorporation of classical motives, as it was previously analysed in his Scottish predecessor's work. Furthermore, he even outwits Macpherson's works at times by his delicate fusion of scientific history and poetic text. That taken into consideration, a realistic assessment of the author's contributions can be made. As he was only a child of his own time, he was able to produce literature in the tradition of his predecessors and educational environment. Still, he was definitely a full-blooded analyst with deep affections for his field of study. Commentators on his biography have tried to interpret his political career alongside the chronology of his writings with limited success. In order to understand any political intentions inherent in his works, which range within more than 50 years of editing, critics have strained the concept of thematic grouping. According to some research, Ferguson must have oscillated between conciliatory literature during his parliamentary years and the retreat into distant epic past when disappointment with his English superiors grew

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ch. X. 2.



throughout the famine years. In the latter, he is additionally ascribed a stronger patriotic stance against imperial devaluation (cf. Patten 176; cf. Graham 74). His heroic poems are often rated as artistic trifles since they cannot clearly be related to any politic agenda (cf. Patten 45). Nonetheless, they are particularly interesting for this study as they express the idea of a Celtic past most directly. Even in Ferguson's lifetime, a hidden political message interested critics more than the artistic value of his long epic poem *Congal*. A conflict between his creativity and suppressed opinion in his corpus therefore has been perceived as one central reason for Ferguson's limited popularity (cf. Graham Strangers 29). Ratings of that kind fail to acknowledge the author's ingenious treatment of lyrical verse and additionally aim outside the scope of artists producing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Ferguson did enjoy a decent reputation in Scottish literary circles and more or less began his literary career under the custody of a Victorian literary avant-garde (cf. Patten 16; cf. Graham Strangers 26). Ferguson's education had circulated around a profound knowledge of classical genre further improved in his law studies (cf. Denman 77-79). Crucial for Renaissance thinking and especially celebrated by Humanists, ancient European literature had re-entered the educational canon at least three centuries prior to the Victorian era. The classical genre had been a favourite domain of the avant-garde since and authors such as Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and John Milton had enriched the previous centuries with their eclogues and epic texts. Antiquarianism itself, as previously mentioned, had already established itself as the gentleman's pastime in England and was of increasing relevance for the Irish academic community. Thorough knowledge of Latin and Greek culture became a means to distinguish oneself and Macpherson's pageant had given a first impression of the potential hidden in reputedly epic narrative with primitive infusion (cf. Levine 137). So, rather than writing on behalf of reconciliation or patriotism his choice of themes and classical genre leaves him confined within his professional environment. In other words, he could not reach beyond the circles of scientists and highly educated upper-class. This also answers the question why he lacked immediate support of the patriotic faction but at the same time was not appealing to any religious interest group (cf. Graham 99; cf. Foster 4). Adhering to the criteria of classical myth and reinventing a strand of heroic lineage with Cuchullin, Cormac etc., Ferguson's intentions reached far beyond ideological support for his contemporaries. Consequently, numerous references to ancient Graeco-Roman, or even Indo-European, culture work in rather self-promotional ways since they put emphasis on the author's expertise. The epic poem in its aetiological function has always been perceived as an instrument for historical recollection and, more importantly,

timeless validity. It serves as yet another “*carmen perpetuum*” elevating the author to spheres of divine inspiration and immortality (Ovid I 4). One aspect, however, has been neglected so far. Ferguson’s deliberate concerting of classical motifs in his texts is, of course, one reason for their quick success within Ireland’s educated circles. Still, it must not be overlooked that, especially in an Irish context, Christian monks had their hands on the original templates first, hence monastic tradition also accounts for some interferences into the original myth. So rather than being the sole reason for classical alterations to his works, Ferguson did simply not dare to scan his material for ecclesiastical adaptations to the text. The key incentive of classical philology to restore the archetypal source was apparently not yet established to such an extent. Eventually, one could get the impression that Ferguson’s intended to revive ancient Irish myth in order to produce highly successful poetry without running the risk of infuriating any party in his conflict ridden mother-country. An antiquarian and member of the Royal Irish Academy, Ferguson intended not to play a major role in politics but rather to raise awareness for cultural treasures within the public.<sup>22</sup> To put it in A. P. Graves words: “He felt that the highest duty he owed his country was that of a poet and prose writer above party” (Ferguson xvii). By recurring to an ancient mode, Ferguson indeed was able to create an idyll in his version of Ireland without drifting off into nationalism, as will be shown.

## 8.2 *The Burial of King Cormac*

In his adaption of the Cormac myth, Ferguson relied on two sources but frankly arranged, and sometimes altered, the content as he saw fit (cf. Denman 90). The entire makeup of this ballad alludes to an ancient classical production. At the beginning the reader is familiarized with reputedly historical facts by an authorial preface, which resembles the style of Macpherson’s historiographic surveys. Ferguson does not claim his poem’s historical authenticity and the preface rather serves its own purpose underlining the author’s universal skills as poet and antiquarian alike. It covers a wide range of events, thereby providing enough context to make up for the lack of coherent narrative background. As the poem begins, the topic is laid out and instantly reveals its first peculiarity.

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<sup>22</sup> Graham also acknowledges that but then drifts off again into the nationalist-unionist dichotomy. *Strangers* P. 28.

"Crom Cruach and his sub-gods twelve,"  
 Said Cormac "are but carven treene;  
 The axe that made them, haft or helve,  
 Had worthier of our worship been. (Cormac line 1-4).<sup>23</sup>

King Cormac, who, according to the preface, reigned in the third century AD, is found contesting his domestic faith. In fact, four stanzas later he confesses his belief in the one true god. Far from being a very plausible occurrence, this introduction addresses what antiquarians of Ferguson's times all too readily dismissed. Ireland's mission is shed light upon since it had been the prime reason for the myth's survival. The tradition of ancient myth by monks in the course of Ireland's mission had been subject to research, accordingly. One of this section's central arguments reveals itself at that point. The original myth must have been altered here in order to make it compliant with the Christian doctrine and Ferguson, as an ardent antiquarian, was unwilling to discharge of this minute historical keepsake. Playing on that, the first few stanzas put a strong emphasis on the natural background of the pagan deities as opposed to the supernatural omnipotence of the Christian God. This superiority over the established domestic religion, however, is potentially equaled by the spiritual authorities, the druids as the poem moves on. They turn their "maledictive stones" and curse the king (Cormac line 13, 16). Whether their spells are effective or not is left unknown as the subsequent circumstances of the king's death are far from magical.

Till, where at meat the monarch sate,  
 Amid the revel and the wine,  
 He choked upon the food he ate,  
 At Sletty, southward of the Boyne (Cormac line 17-20).

Mythological implications, however, do occur in the imagery of Cormac's cause of death. A central Greek myth containing a final stage due to suffocation – or rather the swallowing of an inanimate object – is the removal of Kronos/Saturn after he devoured his children and one stone (Hesiodus I 452-479). In consequence, this act of swallowing a stone leads to the dawn of a new era marked by the rise of new gods; and a very similar situation is rendered by Samuel Ferguson. Before the dying king has spent his last breath, he has two central requests to his entourage. One is to bury him facing the rising sun, which means eastward looking (Cormac line 32). This could be meant, of course, as a conciliatory note

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<sup>23</sup> Further references in this section will exclusively belong to the version of *Poems by Sir Samuel Ferguson* edited by A. P. Graves.

to the English soil incorporated by the author. More likely, it could be yet another display of Ferguson's antiquarian expertise. Many archaeologists have argued for this positioning of the corpse being customary for medieval times, and beyond.<sup>24</sup> On top of that, continental Europe is also denoted as the starting point of Christian mission as "His glory lightens from the east" (Cormac line 37). Prophetic capacities of the main character are highlighted once more. These are in line with Cormac's supernatural agenda which is introduced by his second request. He does not want to share graveyard with his pagan predecessors but has been assigned a place by his god.

And 'twas at Ross that first I knew  
One, Unseen, who is God alone. (Cormac line 35-36).

Obviously, God has decided to reveal himself exclusively to his chosen prophet, a monarch. That fact now puts the Protestant author indeed in context with a rather English literary heritage. Referring to the integrity of the monarch within an epic poem had been the common practice of English Renaissance writers such as Spenser in his *Faerie Queene*. Moreover still, it had been a necessity for writers publishing in the context of the Roman principate. King Cormac's contemporaries all being pagan, of course they disregard his wish and try to lay the corpse to rest in a customary environment. But their venture is deemed to fail.

There came a breath of finer air  
That touch'd the Boyne with ruffling wings,  
It stir'd him in his sedgy lair  
And in his mossy moorland springs.

And as the burial train came down  
With dirge and savage dolorous shows,  
Across their pathway, broad and brown  
The deep, full-hearted river rose; (Cormac line 57-64).

Supernatural powers all of a sudden work against the train in a communal effort. Not God's will alone is presented as an opposing force, but Ireland's natural spirits are personified –as is the Boyne– and act in line with the Christian conviction. Onomatopoeically speaking, they are hissing and swirling over the water (Cormac line 59) and eventually, nature does show its objections to this nefarious endeavor. This now might appear as a clear conflict between the Christian doctrine and primitive naturalistic cults. However, as explained before, the monastic translators had adopted a very inclusive

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Webster, Leslie, and Michelle Brown. *The transformation of the Roman world AD 400-900*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Print.

attitude in this respect. The representatives of a previous faith, marked by their original recitations, simply stand no chance against this accumulated power. Eventually, they will get swept away by the raging river (Cormac line 93). Up to line 100 the poem clearly follows epic conventions, being borne by a hymnal iambic pentameter. It claims its stance as a typical heroic ballad by the use alternating rhyme and quatrains as structural elements. Ferguson thereby artistically embedded this originally Gaelic piece into the English literary tradition. This form is indeed kept until the very end but, strikingly, a very obvious change in thematic terms is revealed to the reader of the last sixteen lines. With regard to generic classification, Ferguson completely abandons the epic setup. Instead, the pastoral idyll Ireland is invoked by some quite typical motives otherwise known from Vergil's *Eclogues* or English adaptations such as Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* or Milton's *Lycidas*. This derivation from heroic myth is so conspicuous, it simply can't have existed in prior sources. Therefore, it must be treated as authorial note of some kind (cf. Denman 92).

At morning, on the grassy marge  
Of Rosnaree, the corpse was found,  
And shepherds at their early charge  
Entomb'd it in the peaceful ground.  
(Cormac line 101-104).



Figure 1: *The Arcadian Shepherds* by Nicolas Poussin, from: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Et\\_in\\_Arcadia\\_ego](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Et_in_Arcadia_ego)

Much more than a precise description Poussin's painting *The Arcadian Shepherds* can speak for this recurrent motive in pastoral art productions. In their tranquil world the young men are distracted by a massive tomb. Already the *Eclogues* did not depict the pastoral idyll as untainted. Daphnis as well as Meliboeus are subtracted from it by force (Virgil 1, 64-78; 5, 20-27). The shepherd in his seemingly peaceful environment has become an established symbolism for "memento mori" ever since (Snyder 125).

Round Cormac Spring renews her buds:  
In march perpetual by his side,  
Down come the earth-fresh April floods,  
And up the sea-fresh salmon glide; (Cormac line 113-116).

Traditionally, the pastoral poem is set in a fictional world, Arcadia (cf. Snyder 48). Having preserved some kind of primordial state, this place often adopts paradisiac elements. Ferguson's depiction of the burial ground corresponds to these, in fact. Its environment flourishes seemingly year round and nature provides its treasures at this spot without the need for human toil. This motif, called "sponte sua", has traditionally been seen as a central marker for Arcadia's integrity as opposed to the world of fallen men. So Ferguson indeed finishes his poem with the image of an ancient quasi-paradise, which is his Ireland.

### C) Homer-Fingal-Hermann. A Survey on the Nationalist Potential Underlying the "Celtic" Narrative

#### 1. The Parallel Development of Historiography and Nationalism

This chapter's focus will lie on the expansion of culture, rites and myth over time and space in a strictly national sense. Particularly the ideological potential of heroic and pseudo-historical narrations will be highlighted from a philosophical perspective and it will be argued that the boundaries between myth and scientific fact are arbitrary ones for the collective memory. People especially from theological contexts have become aware of the cultural phenomenon that practices of a distinct community lose their significance over time but continue to be performed nevertheless. In this process sometimes new values and reasons are ascribed to these practices and even external communities will pick up aspects of them and incorporate these into their collective memory, albeit that they have inherited a completely hollow, if not diverging, simulacrum of the original concept (cf. Porter 427). A similar development can be observed with the popularity of Ossian and the steady growth of nationalism in Europe throughout the nineteenth century. Naturally, it is impossible to single out one specific narrative, which should be seen as the trigger of this sudden self-centredness of communities in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Yet, it should be feasible to analyse basic structures and text types which convey ideological ideas and promote nationalist thinking. In chapter IV.1, several answers were given to the question how Scotland could accept a text of questionable authenticity so readily into its corpus of constitutive narratives. Scotland was arguably in dire need of an identity forming myth and the English crown had contributed its fair share to depriving the population of a distinctly native culture. A general feeling of inferiority in different affairs had evoked resentment as

well as resignation and therefore was an important aspect in the nation's demand for a restored ideological self-perception. The means by which Macpherson could make his text serve a rehabilitating purpose have been restricted to the choice of genre and character development so far. At this stage, one has to keep in mind that *Fingal* was not the only text shaping Scottish national sentiments and that other nations also could rely on their own stock of national narratives. What has been explored in the course of this paper is the dependence of historiography on temporal circumstances and scientific trends. It follows that also reputedly neutral science determines how communities think about themselves but at the same time is determined by what the majority thinks. Barthes' theory brings more clarity into this perplexing matter in the next paragraph. If we are to be careful to differentiate between fictional and scientific texts to single out ideological ideas, what then are the characteristics for national key narratives? Basic ideological structures can already be traced in the ancient foundational texts, as we have seen in the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneis*. Societies of every century have relied heavily on the representation of their past, be it mythological or with a certain claim of factuality. When we look at *Fingal*, we can easily analyse features of the myth affecting the relationship between the nations of the British Isles. The definition of nation itself is in fact deeply imbued by myth and symbolic figures. According to Anderson, a nation is an "imagined political community" and the key feature linking the single individuals to one another must be language (15/ 72). Therefore, it could be argued that Scotland hardly met the criteria of a genuine nation until the Jacobite Rebellion. The archaic clan system of the North meant regionally diverging social structures, and a language barrier between the English speaking regions and their Gàidhealtachd counterparts accounted for a severe north-south-divide (cf. Richards 6f.). In this respect, the marginalisation of Highland culture, a large presence of English government representatives and more centralised communities for the sake of emigration or resettlement brought the whole of Scotland together, arguably for the first time. The ancient "Celtic" civilisation, as it was portrayed by Macpherson, presented yet another state of unity to the country's shared history. Nonetheless, immediately after *the Works of Ossian* had been edited, Scotland divided into two camps once more. The anglophile southern part tended to emphasise its ideological distance to such a primitive Highland culture and saw in the narration itself an attack on the Union (cf. Shields 37f.). The other, weakened part sensed the potential of Macpherson's work in restoring the Highlands' reputation and maybe even fill the empty slot of a shared national past for the entire country (cf. Stafford 32). Within a couple of years, the Ossian question was perceived as a

means to bridge this divide and readers all over the British Isles would celebrate Fingal and his culture as domestic heritage. Furthermore, certain character traits which now –thanks to Macpherson– could be traced back to pre-Christian times soon became a marker for refined Britishness (cf. Shields 2, 171). It is baffling how diversely this myth came to be interpreted and what types of conclusions were drawn from its study. Highland culture redefined and presented in a new light became a concept for what it meant to be Scottish and the foundation of a distinct Highland Society in London is just one out of numerous realisations of this trend.

In the wake of a surfacing desire for national self-definition, more and more nations wanted to express their exceptionality, so they picked up a new genre, the national tale (cf. Hall 81). *The Wild Irish Girl* depicted a model Irishman to the same degree as Richardson's *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* contained clear allusions to proper English chastity. Helme's *Duncan and Peggy: A Scottish Tale* presents two Scottish lovers forced to fit into an alien society in the city of London. It must be argued accordingly that until the end of the eighteenth century a proper feeling of independent national identity did not exist in Scotland and once it did, it inspired the neighbouring countries to furnish national belonging with certain distinctive character traits. Many scholars have been committed to the study of representations of the same stages in a country's past. Long since it has been acknowledged that such text sources are highly influential on the self-perception of a society. One major factor in Macpherson's success was his insistence on the texts' authenticity. As he furnished *Fingal* with scientific commentaries he obviously accredited historical significance to it. Roland Barthes already argued for the ideological power of so-called scientific facts. Historical texts claim to present the truth whether they assume the shape of an analytical contribution to science or are fitted into a narrative frame as in Macpherson's case (cf. Barthes 127-129). Regardless of how he presents it, the author will never accomplish to show a neutral and complete image of history. He will be limited by a certain page range as well as expectations his production has to meet. Therefore, all historical accounts are arranged and manipulated according to the author's intention and will be highly subjective in any case (cf. Barthes 133-136).

What nations accept as their national history always depends on their current needs, correspondingly. Lyotard has coined the term "grand narrative" to refer to these types of text, and it is possible that every generation chooses its own grand narratives anew (Lyotard xxiii). Communities of every size and makeup adopt a different set of narratives and use them as templates for whatever is perceived true or acceptable in their midst.



Whereas Scots were perceived weak and primitive in the years of their failed Jacobite Rebellion, sensibility was turned into their greatest merit after *the Works of Ossian* had become a new grand narrative. At the same time, Scandinavians are displayed as the brutish other, defining the own identity by its foil (cf. Shields 32). These assertions also justify voices of complaint against *Fingal* from sides of the Irish since their grand narrative all of a sudden seemed to slip away. The text is full of ideologically loaded terms from the field of rising and awaking, while strikingly none of these applies to the Irish character Cuchullin (cf. Dennis 13). When we accept the major role such narratives play for the self-perception of a culture, the loss of the same to one's neighbour must have felt like sacrilege. Reasoning that Macpherson did make both nations benefit when their cultural heritage gained them both high reputation in Europe, seems like cold comfort to the bereft party (cf. Moore Whig 20). In a similar way, Assmann's theory that the "kulturelle Gedächtnis," the cultural memory of a nation, consists of everything but historiographic accounts and subconscious performances misses the point (Assmann 9f.). Precisely its claim for objectivity and authenticity is what makes historiography so ideologically influential. We must not separate it from the narrative genre in this respect. Especially epic's three defining pillars, according to Bakhtin, the portrayal of a national past, national tradition as primary source and a clear distance to the present reality make it a historical text, and very much so for the eighteenth century (cf. Bakhtin 13). Authorial intention, a limited scope and dependence on the context of their production are inherent in all portrayals of the past. In the long run it was for ideologically loaded narratives of that kind that single nations rose over one another and eventually marched into war.

The crucial question now remains why Macpherson and Ferguson both decided to fall back on the ancient classical tradition in spite of their texts working very hard to develop something independent and new. One reason irrefutably lies in the Augustan Age, which slowly petered out in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and thus was still mirrored in the school curricula of both authors. The ancient epic was still perceived as the single most authoritative genre and the major part of neoclassical artwork depicted episodes from one of the respective texts. Aeneas and Homer and various other heroes were held for personifications of Roman virtue. What is more, ancient Roman culture has always been associated with greatness and superiority and continues to be, even today.<sup>25</sup> The grand narratives of the Mediterranean world were primarily concerned with imperialism and the propagation of Rome's exceptionality (cf. Reed 73f.). In what would be the final years of

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<sup>25</sup> On the development of Rome's position as role model culture in British literature, see Turner p. 289.

the Roman Republic, the writer Titus Livy saw the need to retrace the roots of his mother country. He thereby managed to establish a coherent story line of Rome's past, which reached back to Aeneas and the Trojan War. As he aspired to his reader's moral education, the poet laureate furnished his work with a genealogy incorporating the most salient anecdotes and myths as it carried on (cf. Hillen 182). His times, characterised by a power shift from parliamentary rule to autocracy, were especially promotional of productions which legitimized the status quo. By subsidising literary circles the principate accomplished a steadily growing embeddedness within Roman culture (cf. Klinger 17-23). Writers of the Mediterranean empire had developed the idea that examples from a morally integer past could provide solutions for current issues. Livy himself states in his preface that he feels obliged to teach his depraved contemporaries by laying out the virtue of their predecessors (Hillen 9). Evidence of that sort conveys the impression that historiography had to serve a certain nationalist purpose from the beginning. In the eyes of Ferguson and Macpherson, the incorporation of classical motives turned out to be the only option for their works to receive the desired acknowledgement. A readership used to certain established patterns in literature would never have granted importance to the idea of a "Celtic" civilisation unless it resembled the familiar writings and defeated the ancient role models with their own weapons. Only by mastering the ancient epic mode could bardic myth be accepted as valuable counterpart to the continental tradition.

## 2. Ossian and the Nordic Renaissance in Europe

It is fair to say that *the Works of Ossian* were about to change Europe's perception of history and its history all the same. In this context, the story of the Nordic Renaissance in central Europe unfolded in 1756 when Paul Henri Mallet published his *Introduction à L'histoire du Danemarch*. Not really catching on at the start, the Swiss scholar's work benefited from the increased interest in northern Europe's primitive past (cf. Hunter 64f.). Especially in Germany this shift from Roman antiquity to a renewed northern self-conception was received with great enthusiasm. While literature of the eighteenth century still primarily stood in the tradition of the classics and German poets celebrated themselves as "*vates*," Ulysses and Aeneas got increasingly marginalized as soon as Mallet and Macpherson conquered the European book market (cf. Lohse 215,225). The Holy Roman Empire, which had conceived of itself as the direct successor of ancient Rome, at that time

was destabilised by internal conflicts. Territorial interest had been in the foreground for quite some time and the great commonwealth of the continent was on the verge of dissolution (cf. Schmid 243; cf. Baumgart 263). Again it was at just the right moment that an ancient “Celtic” civilisation entered the scene with the help of Macpherson and a hand full of like-minded scholars. Even though the German empire was still kept together by all the linking features of a nation which had been missing in Scotland, times of unrest and instability led people to the search for new role models. Instead of yearning for a renewed national self-esteem, a large group of writers was eager to refute everything pretentious and established. Tensions between the classes and an omnipresent feeling of uncertainty drove the writers of the Storm and Stress period into a quest for new heroes, which is typical for the young cultural elite in times of crumbling structures (cf. Nagy 439). Accordingly, only a couple of years after the edition of *the Works of Ossian* new literary figures appear in Germany’s literary scene. Germans were quick to equate *Celtic* with *German*, a fuzziness which is owed to Caesar’s ambiguous description of Gaul in the first book of *de Bello Gallico* (cf. Lohse 225). As a result, the entire area of central Europe could identify with Fingal’s race and all the great kings described in Mallet’s history. A sense of exceptionality was the consequence and renowned scholars were quick to conclude that only Germans were genetically predisposed to the understanding of ancient grandeur and heroism (cf. Lohse 202, 215). In great parts it is owed to Johann W. von Goethe and Johann G. Herder that the bard Ossian became popular in Germany. Not only did they translate Macpherson’s work, but they began to equate “Germanness” and the German ingenuity with the “Celtic” bards (Lohse 211-214; cf. Arnold 31). Being “Celtic” slowly turned into a matter of race and genetic disposition. Whereas in Scotland manners and chivalry had been the major linking features between the nation and its ancestors, Germans started to change it to a sanguine kinship. As soon as it had reached the mainland of Europe, the myth was transformed and helped people to ascribe a certain value to their blood while it devalued contemporaries of other descent. The implications of this kind of ideological absurdity would soon come to light in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. To go back once again to the poets of the Storm and Stress, Herder and Goethe could witness the evolution of Hermann, another ‘Celtic’ hero. Renewed interest in this historical warrior, who defeated the Roman army in 9 AD, goes hand in hand with a completely refurbished conception of “Germanness”. Klopstock stands initially to the eighteenth-century adaptations of this ancient Roman myth with his play *Herrmann Schlacht* in 1769. Through a blend of Ossian’s refinement and Hermann’s superiority, ideological

self-conception could reach new heights in Germany. The ‘Celtic’ tradition finally offered a counterpart to the ancient Roman culture and its symbolic victory even ranked it above the Mediterranean power (cf. Lohse 227). Findings of that sort may provoke the thought that *Fingal* and the heroic narratives spun around a “Celtic” civilisation were the initial spark to a quest for national identity, which occupied large parts of the eighteenth-century artistic scene in Britain and on the European continent. The invention of new genres promoting the idea of nationhood pay tribute to this trend shift as does the abolition of ancient Rome as northern Europe’s role model culture. Whereas ideology of a distinct past helped Scotland and Ireland into a renewed blossoming of literature and the arts, it encouraged others to pervert the notion of cultural ancestry and shape it into an ideology of race. Patriotism, which should be assumed as the main objective of all the artists originally publishing in the Celtic mode in Britain, soon crossed moral boundaries elsewhere turned into the first ugly signs of nationalism. The idea to propagate racial superiority arguably had one out of many roots in the eighteenth-century debate on Scotland’s entitlement to a “Celtic” ancestry.

#### D) Conclusion

The ability to promote an elaborate Iron Age culture accompanied with countless well preserved relics makes the British Isles a decisive factor for Europe’s self-promotion. New methods and better equipment in the field of archaeology account for a steady influx of new discoveries and insights. The so far uncompromised ancient Mediterranean high cultures as magnets for today’s world tourism are steadily losing ground to a renewed interest in northern pre-Christian cultures. What top-notch destinies such as Glasgow and Dublin keep promoting is their exceptionality in charisma and way of life. National self-perception as a part of the Celtic fringe is still reflected in measures to encourage Gaelic language speaking and the names of some major sports clubs. Unfortunately, all too often the celebrated unique temper of the islands’ population is still reduced to matters of genetic disposition. Notions of masculine virtue and toughness are self-referencing aspects for the ancestors of “Celts.” It should have become clear, however, that a distinct Celtic civilization in Ireland or Scotland which preceded the great civilizations of Rome and Greece is only a construct initially fueled by a nationalist quest for a unique identity. In a similar way, James Macpherson and Samuel Ferguson in their quest to produce in a purely

Celtic fashion were both unable to stay clear of influencing factors. They never managed to detach from their academic background and Anglophone literary conventions are prevalent to the same extent as classical genres in their works. So instead of celebrating their legacy as a contribution to the “Celtic” national spirit with all its insurrectional potential, let’s accept it for what it really was; a scholarly endeavor into the ancient tradition of epic heroism drawing from sources of questionable authenticity, but at the same time a deep affection for research into this promising new field. James Macpherson and Samuel Ferguson both had the same reason for invoking an ancient “Celtic” civilization in their texts. What they saw in this pseudo-historical theme was the means to become immensely popular and even make a living in the literary landscape. Macpherson rather unknowingly tried his luck with the creation of Ossian after a couple of academic compatriots had demanded further translations of ancient Gaelic poetry. Ferguson on the other hand had experienced the success of *The Works of Ossian* and sensed the chance to make a case for his own artistic ingenuity by producing in the exact same style, which had recently become so extremely fashionable. Neither of them was striving to create a national key narrative, which would eventually restore their nation’s identity. Moreover an underlying agenda to retaliate the hardships caused by English interference had to be carefully avoided in order not to curb circulation figures from the start. The effects both works eventually had on the literary scene, however, could not be more different. Macpherson substantially influenced the cultural development of Scotland for the centuries to come. Although he spent most of his remaining life defending his narrative in court or suing, if not threatening, the sceptics of Ossian’s authenticity, he came to international fame; and that not only posthumously. Samuel Ferguson was only rediscovered as an author in times of the Irish Literary Revival and even at that point he did not make it into the canon of Ireland’s influential authors. His legacy will therefore remain the one of a learned antiquarian who was very committed to an appreciative revaluation of Ireland’s cultural scene. His contribution to Ireland’s “Celtic” cachet was rather overshadowed by the sheer quantity of monastic sources and the entrenchment of Celtic consciousness among society. The craze renewed by Macpherson in the previous century he could only pick up, the huge demand for Gaelic national narratives in times of Yeats he did not live to see.

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## F) Appendix